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ADVENTURES IN LATIN PROSE

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Long ago when my conscience was at high-water mark and Friday night found me with a pile of Latin prose notebooks to correct, I once read on the fly-leaf of one of these books, in boyish letters, the words, "Great Caesar's Ghost." It was years before I awoke to the value of this boy's grim humor. A few weeks ago a letter came out of the West, asking for suggestions, and containing this most significant suggestion: "In view of the fact that our teaching of Latin prose is a failure" Never more than today have the courts been alive with the discussion as to material for reading, especially in the tenth grade. My small friend's groan of distress and the tone of hopeless resignation from the man in the West show that something is wrong. Is it not possible that in this field of despised Latin prose is an opportunity for administering some remedy? If the prose is a failure the subject may be uninteresting, the material too difficult.

We have, hopefully, in the tenth grade a textbook containing seven books of the *Commentaries*, and we read, hopefully, different selections from these books, from year to year. Now the prose book with its systematic treatment of syntax and fixed illustrative sentences cannot bestir itself to accompany us on our forced march through Gaul. Here is a place where our difficulty is our opportunity. Many of the excellent exercises in the prose book may be omitted and in their place may be substituted a sketch of Caesar's early life. Let it be as long and as interesting as possible, but, above all things, let it be very easy. Have ready also a brief account of each year of the Gallic war, so that when a book or a portion of a book is omitted, the pupils may supply that part and at the year's end have a fairly complete picture of the entire campaign. Supplement this with a short account of Caesar's career after he returned to Italy. The pupils do not find the

translation of this story a stupid task. So, too, it is an excellent plan to have a paragraph telling of Caesar's dramatic appearance in the battle with the Nervii, of the death of Piso the Aquitanian, of the advice of Critognatus, of the brave act of the standard-bearer of the tenth legion where even Caesar forgot himself and rose out of the *oratio obliqua*. I have awakened a dull class—*quorum magna pars fui*—out of a discouraging stupor by sending them unexpectedly to the board to translate from dictation an animated account of some scene in the text, or some event near home. A few pages of easy Latin are far more inspiring to the young student than are a few difficult sentences. In a recent article in the *Classical Journal*, Mr. Foster says that of a child's three difficulties, inflectional system, vocabulary, and word-order, the worst of these is word-order. Surely much writing of easy prose will give a feeling for order, and a sense of the language which will be most helpful in reading. But never, never can it be helpful, if the pupil is allowed to write with a serene indifference to Latin order.

The objection may fairly be raised that this preparation of material involves extra work on the part of the teacher. It does, and if the benefits are not evident, it is not worth the price. But with a mimeograph, or a sympathetic commercial department near, the task is not burdensome. Moreover, much of the work, I suggest, should be unprepared by the class, five or ten minutes of rapid writing at the board, the work to be at once corrected and erased. This is to supplement, but never to take the place of, the regular prepared, corrected, and recorrected exercises. But I contend that it improves the quality and diminishes the necessary quantity of such formal prose. The plan should be very flexible. Let the material illustrate the points of syntax recently introduced, but the difficulty and amount should always be governed by the nature of the class. Classes are but individuals, and what is a profitable pleasure to one is discouraging drudgery to another. The life of Cicero and events attending the delivery of the orations read in the eleventh grade may, in that year, be made the subject of part of the prose work, and in the twelfth grade, the life of Virgil may be treated in the same way.

Aside from this work, which is closely related to the day's

reading, are all sorts of devices which may be used to arouse a lagging interest. In *Sprechen Sie Lateinisch?* are various curiosities and riddles which children enjoy, and can never guess. Anecdotes from the humorous columns of the magazine may be translated into amusing, if not classic, Latin; and we have doubtless all had an attack of translating *Mother Goose*, a diversion to be treated with much caution if our time is valuable. An exercise welcomed eagerly by the pupil is an opportunity to write some story in his own words. The value of this is doubtful. The correcting must be done individually, and the poorest students are always subject to the most disastrous flight of ambition. Yet they do enjoy expressing their own thoughts behind the somewhat impersonal shield of a foreign language. One fall, after a brilliant football season, I asked for an account of a game and received to my surprise a letter from which I give an extract:

LEONARDUS CAESARI S.D.

S.T.V.B.E.E.V. Nostri viri sunt potentiores et fortiores quam tui, quod sine ullis telis aliquos interficere possunt, atque saepe interficiunt, Laetare, Caesar, quod non nunc hic vivis, quod non satis militum ad bellum gerendum et ad exercitum comparandum haberes; quod adolescentuli cotidie interfecti sunt, atque prope ad internecionem gentium venimus. Supplicatio debet esse dies vero magnae laetitiae, quod tum extremus ludus anni et finis rationis mortis erit. O tempora! O mores! Magistri haec intellegunt, populus videt, hic ludus tamen vivit. Vive, valeque, mi amice.

In December we have written letters to Santa Claus, but with indifferent success. High-school pupils are a trifle too young for this, but New Year's resolutions have been written with some satisfaction. Several days before the Kalends of January the pupils are warned that such a resolution will be called for on a certain day. I submit a few examples with some, not all, of their original sins upon them.

Ego ad lectum mature veniam, mature surgam, meas vestis reficiam et bono modo eas servabo.

Minus dicturus sum, plus auditurus sum.

Decerno ut meae parvae sorori dulcior futura sim.

Decerno ut pacem cum mea parva sorore tenere coner.

Decerno ut cottidie gallinis frumentum dem.

Noctes domi remanebo.

Nihil contra ceteros audiam, nihil quod non laudet dicam [amended to read "nil nisi bonum"].

This from one whose small size had been for a contempt unto the others:

Ego crescam.

Plus temporis in agris consumam.

Decerno: Totum annum arecte stabo [*arecte* amended to read, "sublicae modo derecte ad perpendicularum"].

Di immortales! Nolite sinere me in latitudinem crescere!

Ego, L. B. Tobacco utendo in formis omnibus me prohibebo.

Ego noxia herba venefica non utar.

And this surprising resolve:

Statuo me fumum non futurum esse.

One boy who signs himself C. Julius Caesar makes an imposing list of resolutions, which if kept would have entitled that imperator to be a member, even a consistent member, of the Peace Commission, and have affected materially our discussion as to reading-matter in the tenth grade. This boy's production suggests a variation of the exercise. Resolutions might be written in the name of anyone, from Dumnorix to Dido, whose manner of life would bear analysis and reform. Here is a place, however, where great care must be taken, lest the spirit pass the bounds of dignified humor, and become foolish levity. A discussion of the best and poorest of these resolutions makes an interesting and not unprofitable half-hour in class, and adds a trifle to the joy of life.

In February write on the proper day a short paragraph in memory of Washington. This may be the episode of the cherry tree or a more serious appreciation of his later life as *pater patriae*. On the twelfth write a few words about Lincoln. Between these historic birthdays we have occasionally written valentines. These, however, are a little heavy. Witness this *Vetus Nuntius Amoris*: "Cassandra, mea carissima, procul a terra suo cursu per caelum, Phoebus te iam diu observat. Apollo te, puellam pulcherrimam, propter mirabilem formam venustatemque, nomine et memoria Beati Valentini salutat." The Latin words do not lend themselves gracefully to this style of composition in the hands of children to whom Catullus is not even a name.

But March is full of possibilities. Our page this month in the school paper is headed "Utinam mensis Martius leoni similis ineat, exeat similis agno." There is an account of the fatal Ides in the senate house which always makes Caesar seem more alive. There is the story of St. Patrick and the snakes. And the *Liberalia*, the graduation of the *puer Romanus*, is always interesting. In fact, it is possible to make a complete *Fasti* to follow through the year—and most unwise to follow it. Nothing is more deadly than to ask pupils to be amusing in a certain way on a certain date. Unless the plans are spontaneous and surprising they may be worse than useless. This has been our experience in regard to having a classical page in our high-school paper: the pupils take great pride in it for a few months; soon we find that we, the teachers, are soliciting all the contributions, correcting all the proof, and explaining all the jokes. When this state of things presents itself, it is time to stop and return to plain *cum*-temporal clauses.

But each year as commencement draws near, I like to surprise the Senior class with D'Arcy Thompson's experiment. "I have been learning Latin for six years and upon my word I don't think I could, in that language, say *Bo* to a goose." But we have studied Latin less than four years, and being so far from Caesar's one goose and so near Virgil's similes, we try to say *Bo* to a snake. *Bo* has appeared as *abi*, *egredere*, *proficiscere*, and even *procul*, *O*, *procul*!

In conclusion let it be emphasized that this diversion does not take the place of plain formal prose, nor does it dispense with a prose book. In fact, the book must be used with greater care. Nor should all these exercises be given to all classes in one year nor in all four years to one class. Some classes may need nothing of the sort, but if the class is dull and discouraged it is worth while to try some leaven in the lump. And I repeat that a large amount of very easy prose is more helpful toward ease in reading than is the scattered collecting of the members of "Great Caesar's Ghost." Good Mr. Johnston warned us years ago not to make the little girl cry. We may add, if possible make the little girl laugh. A laugh in a schoolroom is as invigorating as a fire-drill; and even in a Latin prose class life may be well lived.